Bowling Green State University

ScholarWorks@BGSU

Honors Projects   Honors College

Spring 4-27-2016

Media Literacy Curriculum for the Adolescent Young Adult Classroom

Leah Oliver
leaho@bgsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, and the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Media Literacy Curriculum for the Adolescent Young Adult Classroom

Leah Oliver

Bowling Green State University

April 2016

Abstract

The American public education system has been lagging behind other developed nations in its implementation of media literacy curricula throughout all grade levels. As mass media outlets (including television, film, magazines, advertisements, and video games) become more prevalent in our society, the accompanying job market and the everyday use of electronic media platforms require high school and college graduates to have at least a basic understanding of how media can be used to disseminate information and to buy and sell products. Moreover, research studies in the field suggest that exposure to popular culture mass media can greatly influence teens' self-esteem, body image, and behaviors. Learning critical thinking skills and applying these skills to different media messages is shown to help decrease some of these undesirable implications for youth. I argue that media literacy curricula should be incorporated into more American public school districts and that individual educators need to spearhead the movement. I then offer a sample media literacy curriculum that focuses specifically on representations of gender (a continuum of masculinity and femininity) in order to teach critical thinking skills necessary for the deconstruction of media messages.

During my first year of undergraduate work at Bowling Green State University, I watched Jean Kilbourne's *Killing Us Softly 3: Advertising's Image of Women* for the first time, and my life changed forever. Until that point, I had accepted almost all of the gender-based media messages that had been directed my way; I woke up an hour before school everyday in order to carefully apply make-up, coif my hair to perfection, and choose outfits that accentuated the right parts of my body. Kilbourne's film, however, exposed me to the figurative "writing on the wall" and showed me how women's bodies are objectified in order to sell goods and services to the consumer market. I realized that not only had popular culture mass media taught my friends and classmates to objectify women's bodies—and by default, my own body—but it had also encouraged me to objectify myself. This newfound awareness inspired me to think differently about myself and about women's bodies, and it also provided me with rudimentary tools to lend a critical eye toward future media messages that I would encounter.

Four years later, as I began pursuing a minor in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, my Introduction to Women's Studies class watched the film *Miss Representation*—another documentary that focuses on the portrayal of women and their bodies in mass media outlets. During class discussion following the screening, my professor asked if anyone in the class had participated in media literacy courses or media literacy training during high school. In a class of nearly 30 students, not one raised her hand. As a future educator, I recognized the lack of instruction that American schools are providing in this field and became determined to incorporate media literacy and critical thinking skills into my own classroom.

Before offering a potential media literacy curriculum that could be incorporated into the Adolescent Young Adult (grades 7-12) classroom, I find it useful to provide some discussion on the research that has framed my work and to address some basic questions and concerns that

those in the education field may raise regarding my work. First, I would like to provide some

basic definitions for what constitutes "media literacy." In their book *Media Literacies: A Critical*

Introduction (2012)*,* Michael Hoechsmann and Stuart R. Poyntz define media literacy as "a set

of competencies that enable us to interpret media texts and institutions, to make media of our

own, and to recognize and engage with the social and political influence of media in everyday

life (pg. 1). Jeff Share, author of *Media Literacy is Elementary: Teaching Youth to Critically*

Read and Create Media (2009)*,* echoes Hoechsmann and Poyntz's statement:

> Critical media literacy is an educational response that expands the notion of literacy to
>
> include different forms of mass communication, popular culture, and new technologies,
>
> as well as deepens the potential literacy education to critically analyze relationships
>
> between media and audiences, information and power. (pg. 37)

These two definitions reveal many of the fundamental beliefs concerning media literacy's

importance in 21st century learning: these include, but are not limited to, the belief that media

corporations and institutions hold power over consumers and audiences and that specialized

critical thinking skills are necessary for adequately interpreting media messages. These

definitions also suggest that a media literacy curriculum should work to evaluate current power

structures between media corporations and their audiences, should teach critical thinking skills in

conjunction with technology, and should encourage media literacy students to construct media

messages of their own.

Now that I have offered some definitions for what exactly constitutes media literacy, I

would like to offer some reasons for why media literacy skills are essential for 21st century

education. James Potter, author of *Theory of Media Literacy: A Cognitive Approach* (2004) says

that people today are so bombarded by media messages that they adapt a coping mechanism of

unconscious acceptance: "The media provide so much information that we cannot physically avoid it, so we psychologically protect ourselves by processing it automatically…as we become comfortable employing automatic processing with its focus on efficiency, we let our skills of meaning construction atrophy" (pg. 1). Potter suggests that the longer people live without employing media literacy skills, the more difficult it may be to teach them to be critical of their media. Many authors who write about media literacy often point to Holocaust propaganda as prime evidence for why media literacy is so crucial. As Hoechsmann and Poyntz (2012) say, "We have a tendency to mistake culture for nature" (pg. 63). Without critical media skills, people are more likely to accept media messages automatically and assume their truth. Frank W. Baker (2012) summarizes this point nicely: "Educated people who are media literate are more likely to be able to spot propaganda, question marketing, understand stereotypes, and identify their own biases as well as those of authors. Without media literacy, more people will be fooled because they don't understand how they're being manipulated" (pg. 14). As American educators, living in a country with its own history of discriminatory propaganda, we should be dedicated to making sure that our students are not, as Baker says, fooled or manipulated by media companies.

The ability for media companies to persuade and manipulate our youth is increased when one considers the number of available outlets from which the American public receives information. For example, most television networks have been consolidated ("bought out") by larger media corporations; these "Big 4" transnational media companies include Disney, News Corp., Time Warner, and Viacom (Hoechsmann and Poyntz, 2012, pg. 28). After content is filtered through these corporations (with men usually occupying the highest positions and therefore choosing who and what gets screen time), American children have very few representations of people and of "real life" available. Most of the people they see on screen are

physically fit, white, upper-middle class, have two heterosexual parents living at home, et cetera.

These do not reflect the real conditions of American youth and their families living in our society

today. Students need to learn how to turn a critical eye toward their media and analyze how these

false representations may impact their own worldview, perception of self, and perception of

others.

Not only are experts in the field concerned about children's media habits, but parents are

also worried, as digital media is becoming the primary source of entertainment and information

for most American children and teens. Hoechsmann and Poyntz (2012) argue that children are

getting older faster in today's society: "The age of sexual knowledge and consent for young

people has declined over the past two decades…as has the age at which kids learn about drugs

and alcohol" (pg. 21). They also note that "parents worry about weight gain, children's inability

to communicate face-to-face with peers and adults, and the encouragement of violence

(especially in video games)" (pg. 26). Although scholars, teachers, and parents are all concerned

about the potential side effects of young people's increased consumption of media and

acceptance of media-endorsed behaviors (such as unprotected sex and violence), the U.S. public

education system has yet to incorporate specific media literacy standards into its national

curricula—the Common Core State Standards.

America's Common Core Standards do not ignore media altogether, however. While

some of the Common Core standards address media, they do so passingly and in service of other

educational goals. For example, in the ninth and tenth grade standards for Language Arts, one

standard reads, "Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and

interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and

evidence and to add interest" (Media Clearinghouse). This standard undoubtedly addresses

media; however, its aim is to enhance students' persuasive rhetoric and to "add interest" to their

visual presentations. The standards, as they are currently written, do little to achieve the goals of

media literacy education as outlined in the first portion of this essay, including the ability to

evaluate power structures between media corporations and their audiences, the ability to think

critically about media representations of different groups of people, and the ability to create

media of one's own.

In fact, the U.S. is lagging behind other developed nations in its implementation of

critical media literacy skills (such as the ones listed above) in the public education system.

Canada, New Zealand, and Australia all mandate media literacy education in their national

curricula. Great Britain offers Media Studies as a separate discipline, which is often offered as an

elective course. Additionally, in 2006, eight European nations (Austria, Belgium, Great Britain,

France, Germany, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden) created the European Charter for Media

Literacy, which promotes a common definition of media literacy across Europe and supports

teachers in implementing media literacy in their classrooms (Share, 2009, pg. 45). Hoechsmann

and Poyntz (2012) argue that the U.S. has had difficulty in creating a national movement toward

media literacy because of the physical space between teaching communities in the U.S. and its

lack of teacher preparation programs that adequately instruct future educators on the tenets of

media literacy (pg. 11). Jeff Share (2009) also notes the negative repercussions of President

Bush's No Child Left Behind Act and its emphasis on "skill and drill" high-stakes testing: "The

current obsession with standardized high-stakes testing and the movement back to basics that has

bumped critical thinking to the periphery…makes the implementation of media education in the

U.S. even more difficult. The precious little time in the classroom has become filled with test

preparation and skill and drill" (pg. 40).

Despite our current American academic environment, some educators and teacher education programs are recognizing the importance of media literacy in children's lives today. After-school programs like the Educational Video Center (EVC) in New York City and REACH in Los Angeles offer opportunities for inner-city youth to create alternative media and challenge stereotypical representations (Share, 2009, pg. 42). Organizations like the Center for Media Literacy have developed resources and curricula for American teachers to use and incorporate into their classrooms. Additionally, Jeff Share (2009) notes that a few U.S. universities have begun offering degree programs in Media Education; these include Appalachian State in North Carolina and Webster University in Missouri (pg. 39).

While these initiatives demonstrate the practical ways in which media literacy has been promoted for American youth, researchers have also been interested in studying the effectiveness of media literacy programs in public classrooms. One study by Fingal and Jolis (2014) examined whether or not the Center for Media Literacy's *Beyond Blame* media literacy curriculum (which targets representations of violent behavior in different media outlets) actually resulted in decreased violent behaviors among youth and in changed media consumption behaviors. The results of the study were promising: students who received *Beyond Blame* training "reported increased knowledge of media literacy and healthier beliefs about media violence, compared with controls, when they were tested directly after the intervention." Additionally, "When students were re-tested the next academic year, the curriculum was associated with a reduction in media consumption and aggressive behaviors" (pg. 17). Another study by Yvette Lapayese (2012) on American Catholic high schools shows that media literacy curricula can serve to be cross-curricular and can promote theoretical thinking among students. One of the English teachers in Lapayese's study reports, "The same skills you would need to analyze a text of

Emerson run along the same line as the skills you would need to analyze media. The girls would sometimes refer back to the media lesson and look at literature with a new lens in how the female characters are portrayed" (pg. 10).

In pursuit of similar results from my future students, I have drawn upon my background in Women's Studies and have created a media literacy curriculum with an emphasis on representations of gender (masculinity and femininity) in different types of media. In her essay "A Feminist Critique of Media Representation" (1999), Donna E. Alvermann outlines three reasons feminists have historically critiqued the media. First, she says, feminists try to challenge gender norms and behaviors, such as men being the "breadwinners" while women stay home and care for children, in the media. Secondly, feminists challenge the objectification of the female body in pornography, advertising, magazines, and other media outlets. Lastly, they fight dominant ideologies (e.g. heteronormativity) that make certain behaviors seem to be "commonsense" while others seem strange or atypical (pg. 144). These are the goals underpinning my curriculum; I want my future students to expand their understandings of gender expectations and gender behavior through education in media literacy. However, my curriculum could be adapted to focus on other underrepresented groups in the media, including people from various racial/ethnic groups, socioeconomic statuses, dis/ability levels, et cetera. Because the American public education system has not made media literacy education a priority, I think individual educators must spearhead the movement towards greater media education for American youth. I hope that this project will inspire other educators to incorporate these skills into their classrooms, whether by adapting the curriculum I have created here or by creating media curricula of their own.

References

Alvermann, Donna E. (1999). A feminist critique of media representation. In L. Semali & A.W.

Pailliotet (Eds.), *Intermediality: The teachers' handbook of critical media literacy* (141-

153). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Baker, F. W. (2012). *Media literacy in the K-12 classroom.* Washington D.C.: International

Society for Technology in Education.

Fingar, K.R., & Jolls, T. (2014). Evaluation of a school-based violence prevention media literacy

curriculum. *Injury Prevention, 20(3),* 183-190. Retrieved from

http://www.medialit.org/sites/default/files/Injury%20Prevention%20Journal%202013.pdf

Hoechsmann, M., & Poyntz, S.R. (2012). *Media literacies: A critical introduction.* Malaysia:

Blackwell Publishing.

Lapayese, Y.V. (2012). Going against the grain: Gender-specific media education in Catholic

high schools. *Catholic Education. 15(2).* 207-225.

Media Literacy Clearinghouse. (n.d.). *References to media in the common core standards.*

Retrieved from http://www.frankwbaker.com/media_core.htm

Potter, J. W. (2004). *Theory of media literacy: A cognitive approach.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Publications.

Share, J. (2009). *Media literacy is elementary: Teaching youth to critically read and create*

media. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.